

Refugees from the land of the Mullahs

In Turkey, Iranians who have escaped their regime dream of the day their homeland changes

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Ben Curtis/AP/ Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images

“Everybody in the square was angry, but there was also some sort of energy coming from the group. It seemed like an uprising. We felt free to do what we wanted, like a revolution. Everyone was united over the same thing, which was opposition to Ahmadinejad and the election results. Then we saw the Basij coming.”

Makan Akhavan is recalling the night after last year’s disputed June 12 election in Iran, when large crowds gathered in Tehran’s Kaj Square to protest results they believed had been rigged to give victory to hardline incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

For Ahmadinejad’s opponents, the previous morning—voting day—had begun with such promise. “There was this bursting of freedom,” says Akhavan, 23. “We knew we were winning.”

Supporters of Ahmadinejad’s main rival, Mir Hossein Mousavi, had seen their numbers swell in the weeks leading up to the election and believed they had momentum on their side. Many did not necessarily agree with Mousavi’s moderately reformist agenda, but they backed him anyway out of a desire to protest Ahmadinejad or even the Islamic regime itself.

But that night, too soon to be considered credible, it was announced that Ahmadinejad had secured an improbable landslide. At first, says Akhavan, people were paralyzed by shock. But the demonstrations, when they materialized, were furious. There were too few Basijis (paramilitaries aligned with the regime’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) to corral the protesters in Kaj Square, so they started clubbing them. Then the Revolutionary Guards themselves swarmed in. “They came from all sides. It seemed like it had been planned,” says Akhavan.

Akhavan was arrested and photographed, but he escaped in the ensuing melee when protesters attacked the car he had been shoved into. He bolted through streets now filled with smoke and screams. Security forces later raided his parents’ home and searched his room. They found political pamphlets for the Constitutionalist Party of Iran, a monarchist opposition group with a following among Iranian exiles.

The police already knew who Akhavan was because of at least one previous arrest for protesting against the government. He was afraid to return home and instead left Tehran to stay with a friend in another city. Ten days later, Akhavan’s parents received an order from the Islamic Revolutionary Court demanding that Akhavan turn himself in. He filled a small backpack with donated clothes and fled the country.

Akhavan tells this story in his below-ground, one-room apartment in the Turkish city of Agri. He wears a sky-blue tank top and a green bracelet. His black hair is cut short and there is a tattoo of a vine running up and down his muscular left arm. The apartment is musty, the bed unmade. He holds up a clear plastic tub full of antidepressants. “All of us refugees have nerve problems and need these just to function,” he says.

Repression in Iran is pushing hundreds of Iranians into Turkey. There are 100 in Agri alone, another 250 in Van, down from more than 1,000 in that city last year, according to Iranians living there now. Most who left Van have sought refuge abroad. Of those who remain, some, like Akhavan, came after last year’s post-election demonstrations, when Iranian security forces tried to crush public dissent with mass arrests, show trials, prison rapes and executions. On the night he was briefly detained, Akhavan was with two friends, Ashka Karkhane and Amir Najafi, who did not get away. He has not heard solid information about their fate since.

Others are practitioners of the Baha’i faith, whose persecution has intensified of late. Shakib Adibzadeh, 26, tells *Maclean’s* his family home was pelted with garbage, and his relatives were harassed on the street. His brother could not get accepted to university. His employer would not pay him, knowing the state would do nothing about it. When members of his family tried to set up their own business, they could never get a permit. Baha’i graves were dug up and destroyed. Adibzadeh and his family fled to Van. Canada has recently accepted him as a refugee.

Ahmad Mousavi, another Iranian in Van, is gay. He was in love with a Baha’i man, whose phone calls the security services were monitoring. “That’s how I was found out,” he says. Tormented by his homosexuality, Mousavi had converted to Christianity in an effort to become heterosexual. It didn’t work, but his dalliance with the church gave intelligence ministry officials one more thing to hold against him, in addition to his homosexuality and friendship with a Baha’i. They forced Mousavi to sign a declaration promising to get married and shun non-Muslims. “I could have done everything they asked except get married,” he says. “I couldn’t marry a girl.”

Instead, Mousavi hired Kurdish smugglers to sneak him across the mountains into Turkey. He now works illegally, for little money, in construction. He says he’s no longer Christian or Muslim but believes in God. He’s hoping to be accepted as a refugee somewhere in the West. Among those Iranians who fled the Islamic Republic is one who helped build it.

Amanullah Mashayekhi is 50 years old, and as a teenager witnessed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s ascent to power. He supported the Islamic Revolution and joined the Revolutionary Guards, the regime’s most trusted soldiers and its ideological enforcers. “Like any young man, I wished better for myself and my country,” he says in Van, explaining his decision.

Mashayekhi distinguished himself in the Iran-Iraq War, especially the 1980-’81 siege of Abadan, and was steadily promoted. In 1983, following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon during that country’s civil war, he was among the hundreds of Revolutionary Guards sent to Lebanon to train Shia militants there, including those who would soon form the Hezbollah militia.

Mashayekhi was in Lebanon from June 1983 until January 1984, in the midst of some of the deadliest attacks against Western targets in the country. He arrived shortly after the U.S. Embassy was bombed, killing more than 60, and he was there in October when French and American military barracks were hit by truck bombs, killing 299.

Iran has been linked to all three attacks. Robert Baer, a CIA operative in Lebanon during the 1980s, says Shia militant Imad Mughniyah likely played a role in the embassy bombing.

Mughniyah was also indicted by a U.S. grand jury for the barracks attacks. (He was assassinated in a car bomb attack in Damascus in 2008.) Mashayekhi regularly met Mughniyah among Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon. He’d also run into Hassan Nasrallah, who now leads Hezbollah, and Husayn al-Musawi, founder of the Shia Islamist group Islamic Amal. All three men were taken by the Guards to Iran and trained in the city of Qom.

Mashayekhi says he was not involved in the bombings. He’s reluctant to speak much about them. He still has family in Iran and is applying for asylum in the United States. What he will say is that he left the Revolutionary Guards, disillusioned, a few years later, in 1986. “We in the revolutionary movement never reached what we revolted for. We thought we’d turn Evin into a garden,” he says, referring to the prison where political prisoners were held during the shah’s reign, and where they are still kept today. “Instead, more Evins were built.”

Mashayekhi began supporting reformist politicians in Iran, hoping that Iran’s political system could be liberalized. He lost faith in this gradual approach after Mohammad Khatami’s first presidential term ended in 2001 with little progress. Iran’s president is ultimately subservient to the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who blocked Khatami’s reform efforts. “Unfortunately, even with all the ruin that revolution can bring, there is no other choice,” he now says, meaning he doesn’t think Iran’s Islamic government can evolve on its own. Instead, he believes, freedom will come with an uprising.

Mashayekhi started making contact with Iranian opposition activists based outside the country. This took him to Turkey in 2005. He was arrested upon returning to Iran, along with his son Reza, then 19, and accused, among other alleged offences, of meeting with the CIA and Israel’s spy agency, Mossad. Reza was accused of co-operating with his father but was, as he puts it, “a hostage to put pressure on my father.”

Amanullah and Reza, who is also in Van, say they were tortured physically and mentally during their incarceration. Reza suffered sleep deprivation and solitary confinement. Amanullah says he was shown blood-covered cages where, it was implied, he would die. His interrogators suggested his daughter might soon be crushed by a car. At one point, he says, a loaded gun was held to his head. “I’ve been bombed by Iraq, Israel, and the Americans,” he says he told his captors, recalling his time fighting in the Iran-Iraq War and in Lebanon. “You think I’m afraid of some blood? Pull the trigger and free me from this nightmare.”

Amanullah and Reza were freed, eventually. Amanullah had spent 18 months in jail, Reza about nine. Amanullah likely benefited from his past in the Revolutionary Guards, and the actual evidence against them was thin. But the regime’s pressure did not abate. Basijis beat up Reza at university. Revolutionary Guards interrogated Amanullah at his home, demanding he confess to contact with American agents. Their movements were restricted. Fearing they would be arrested again, Amanullah and Reza decided to go to Turkey. They crossed the mountains in a snowstorm that left Amanullah sick for months.

The two now live in a small flat they share with another man. They’ve been in Van three years, long enough for Amanullah to cultivate a tomato garden in the stony yard. They’ve had at least one interview with the Americans and are waiting to hear if their application for refugee status will be accepted.

At first glance, Amanullah appears an unlikely candidate to be granted political asylum in the United States, given his history in the Revolutionary Guards when the organization was, allegedly, killing American civilians and Marines in Lebanon. But Amanullah says the Guards themselves have always been split between hard-liners and reformists. “There was a powerful minority who shaped the Revolutionary Guards into what they are today. It was and still is a small minority that conducts terrorism and international attacks,” he says. “Thousands of people from the same revolutionary generation are now protesting this regime.”

It is true that some of Iran’s most prominent dissidents are former Revolutionary Guards—including the writer Akbar Ganji, who in 2000 was awarded a press freedom award by Canadian Journalists for Free Expression. (Ganji could not accept the award in person until 2007, because he spent most of the previous six years in jail.)

In July, Mohammad Ali Jafari, current commander of the Revolutionary Guards, admitted that many top officers in the Guards support the opposition Green Movement. And the Iranian government announced this summer that some 250 Guards officers had suddenly resigned. Also this year, three Iranian diplomats defected in Europe, suggesting opposition to the regime exists even within Iran’s political and military establishment.

Amanullah says people can change, and so can their political loyalties. In Van he has struck up a friendship with Bina Darabzand, a man he might have clashed with during his early days in the Revolutionary Guards.

Darabzand, 53, is a socialist and a long-time opponent of Iran’s Islamic regime. He was jailed from 2004 to 2006, accused of forming revolutionary cells, and moved to Turkey this year. When a reporter from *Maclean’s* met him in September, he was waiting for his wife to join him. In the 31 years since the Islamic Revolution, they’ve missed a lot.

“It will be the first time I’ll be able to take her dancing,” he says. “We’ve been married 25 years. It’s about time.”